

# 40 EPA recommends a higher wage

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The EPA is recommending a minimum wage of \$19.55 an hour for Libby cleanup workers but the final decision may rest with the U.S. Department of Labor.

Libby Superfund project manager Jim Christiansen said federal labor officials asked for a recommended wage to consider. Christiansen passed along the wage recommended by the Montana Department of Labor for asbestos-cleanup workers.

"The wages went down too much, more than I wanted to," Christiansen said at the Thursday night's Citizens Advisory Committee meeting. "We made some mistakes with no notice to the workers, which made them upset

## Resolution seeks adequate funding

Local groups involved with the Libby Superfund are circulating a resolution seeking restoration of the EPA's budget to complete the cleanups in a timely manner.

The resolution seeks to unite the community in the request, which will be made to EPA director Mike Leavitt when he visits the community later this spring.

Leavitt's Senate confirmation was held up until he promised Montana U.S. Sen. Max Baucus that he would visit the Libby Superfund site. Leavitt tried to make that visit on short notice in January but was asked to reschedule later in the spring.

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and rightfully so."

As the result of federal budget cuts to the EPA, Christiansen has been looking for ways to cut expenses for the Libby

cleanup so as not to slow up the project.

Workers were told in January that their wages would drop \$10 an hour. People who had been paid hourly wages

of \$24.29 to \$29.38 will be paid \$14 to \$18 for every hour of work.

Christiansen said his intention was the wages would be reduced when the new project contracts were granted later this spring. Due to a misunderstanding, the wages were cut during a task change last month.

Christiansen told workers Wednesday night that he is recommending a wage of \$19.55, a drop of \$5.74. And workers will be paid the wage retroactively to make up for the reduction to \$14 an hour.

Christiansen described the meeting as "tense."

"Obviously they weren't happy but I told them we would work with them,"

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Christiansen said. "Work is continuing to go on."

During a meeting almost two weeks ago, union officials urged the workers to organize so they could negotiate for a livable wage.

"I'm not sure how union organization would affect the project," Christiansen said on Thursday. "That will be between them and their employers. It seems that is the direction some of them are going."

It is not unusual for wage cuts or adjustments on cleanup projects, Christiansen said, especially among private contractors.

If cleanup activities are turned over to W.R. Grace after the bankruptcy proceedings are settled, the company would not be required to pay Davis-Bacon wages, which tend to run higher, Christiansen said.

In the Libby wage dispute, Christiansen said he suggested it as a means of cutting costs as a result of budget cutbacks for the

project. He said the contractors suggested a wage to VOLPE, the federal contracting agency for the government under the Department of Transportation. The recommended reduced wage was put into place before Christiansen had planned it and without warning to anyone.

The Davis-Bacon Act had recommended wages for four different categories of construction activities but not asbestos removal from residences in Montana, Christiansen said. Wages should have been adjusted when Libby project work changed from the heavy construction work of the earlier investigation and cleanup to the present residential cleanups.

The wage cut affects about 42 employees of MARCOR.

The EPA's budget has been cut by about \$5 million leaving Christiansen few options for the Libby project.

"Almost everything we have is geared toward essential cleanups," he said. "If an emergency comes up and costs

\$400,000 while the average house is costing \$40,000 — that's 10 houses we don't do."

Christiansen has said that about \$5 million to \$6 million is spent on local payroll with a total of \$9 million spent in the Libby area during the past year.

The EPA has identified 1,300 structures in the Libby-Troy

area that needed asbestos-tainted vermiculite removed. They completed 200 cleanups by the end of 2003.

Community concerns with the budget cuts are that the cleanup will not be completed in a timely fashion and linger, casting a pall on the area's economic development efforts.

## Resolution

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In recommending Libby for Superfund cleanup in December 2001, Gov. Judy Martz said, "the residential and business district must be cleaned and de-listed within a minimum amount of time. I am asking that the town be cleaned and de-listed in three years. A prolonged cleanup is not acceptable to this community or me. I want the EPA to commit to moving this cleanup as quickly as possible."

Under the EPA's time schedule, prior to a \$5 million budget cut, they were planning to clean 200 homes a year. That would mean completion of the commu-

nity cleanup in about 5 to 6 years. That would come almost 8 years after the governor's speech in Libby.

Budget cuts threaten to prolong the EPA's presence in Libby to 12 years or longer.

That doesn't include the cleanup work needed to be done at the former Libby vermiculite mine.

"The chance of the EPA getting funding to investigate and clean up the mine site is very low," project manager Jim Christiansen said Thursday night. "It's quite a few years down the road."